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ABSTRACT

The 1986 report by the Canadian Task Force on Aboriginal Languages, which recommended that the writing systems used for the northern Dene languages be standardized within 10 years, resulted in the 1987 Dene Standardization Project. The mandate for the project was to make recommendations on orthography standardization as the first step in the process of encouraging widespread native language literacy, the publication of native language materials, and ultimately the preservation of the Dene languages in a technological era that places high demands for literacy and depends on the print media for the retention and transmission of information. This paper reports on the Dene languages and writing systems in the Northwest Territories, the Dene alphabetic system, and types of and rationale for standardization. Recommendations deal with five broad orthographic issues: alternate pronunciations, alphabet symbols, use of symbols, word divisions, and punctuation. The concluding paragraphs note that the Dene Standardization Project is a model for other language groups undertaking orthographic standardization. (LB)

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The Dene Standardization Project

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In the fall of 1985, the Government of the Northwest Territories (NWT) instituted the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages which completed its report in 1986. This commission recommended that the writing systems used for the northern Dene languages be standardized within ten years. The government response to this recommendation was favorable, and the Dene Standardization Project was initiated in 1987. The mandate for the project was to make recommendations on orthography standardization as the first step in the process of encouraging widespread native language literacy, the publication of native language materials, and ultimately the preservation of the Dene languages in a technological era which places high demands for literacy and depends on the print media for the retention and transmission of information.

The project was made up of a planning committee which comprised five linguists and one fluent and literate speaker from each language group. The planning committee representatives selected five members from each language group, including elders, to sit on working committees. The purpose of the working committees was to hold community level discussions to evaluate and revise the writing systems in current use. Recommendations on standardization were submitted to the planning committee, and through discussion, consensus on standardization was generally attained.

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The Dene languages and writing systems

The five Dene languages spoken in the NWT are Gwich'in (formerly known as Loucheux), South Slavey, North Slavey, Chipewyan, and Dogrib. There are speakers of South Slavey in British Columbia, the Yukon, and Alberta, of Gwich'in in the Yukon and Alaska, and of Chipewyan in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. These five languages are related to other Dene languages in North America such as Chilcotin spoken in British Columbia, Sarsi spoken in Alberta, and Navajo spoken in the southwestern United States.

A syllabic writing system based on the system developed for Cree and Ojibwe was introduced to the Dene people of the North by missionaries in the 19th century. There are still older people living who can read and write in syllabics and many archival materials have been written using this script. This system is, however, incomplete since many distinctive sounds are not represented.

Over the last twenty years, educators, translators, and fluent Dene speakers used reasonably accurate alphabetic writing systems successfully. Because of this fact it seemed feasible to concentrate on refining and standardizing the alphabetic writing system. In addition, the majority of native language speakers in North America use alphabetic writing systems. Even language groups using syllabics in some regions use an alphabetic system in other regions. This is the case for the Ojibwe who use syllabics in the Lake of the Woods area and Roman orthography in other parts of Ontario.

The Dene alphabetic system

The basic principle underlying an alphabetic writing system is that there is a one-to-one symbol to sound correspondence. The alphabetic writing systems developed for the Dene languages are based on this principle and use basically the same letters of the Roman or Latin alphabet as are used to write English. The Dene writing systems are more systematic than English because one sound is always represented by the same symbol. Students learning to write in Dene have little difficulty spelling correctly provided they

learn the alphabet symbols, correctly match up what sounds are heard with the appropriate symbol, and learn a small set of simple writing rules.

Although it is very easy to learn and to teach Dene literacy because the writing system reflects spoken Dene closely, there are still problem areas with respect to the practical orthographies in current use. Literate speakers often have difficulty deciding where to make word breaks, how to write compound words and which forms to use in dictionaries. A further problem with the Dene writing systems is that variation in speech between individuals and between communities is encoded in the writing system. For some Dene language groups there are at present competing writing systems and different spelling practices. Yet another area of concern is how to represent the difference in speech between younger and older speakers.

The challenge for the Dene Standardization Project has been to decide between varying systems for each language and, within each language group, to decide between the varying systems for each dialect. A further challenge has been to make sure that the systems have symbols for all of the sounds which are recognized as distinct sounds by speakers of that language. For example, whether a vowel has high or low tone makes a difference in meaning for a word in Chipewyan. If you say *sela*, with low tone, it means *my cousin*, but if you say *selá* with high tone, it means *my hand*. Because tone is recognized as meaningful by native speakers, it must be written. Furthermore, the writing system must not represent information which is not meaningful to speakers. In Dogrib for example, it does not make a difference whether a speaker pronounces the word for *fire* with an [o] vowel or with a [u] vowel. Whether you say *kǫ̀* or *kų̀*, your listener will understand that you mean *fire*. For this reason only the vowel [o] is written. The final and major challenge to the Dene Standardization Project has been to resolve the problem of choosing alphabets and writing conventions for each language which conform to a standard across the five Dene languages.

What is standardization?

There are differences in the speech of all speakers of a language. These differences are owing to geography, to social groupings, and to social context. The task of the Dene Standardization Project was to select writing systems and rules for writing that could accommodate these differences for each language group, and yet could bring about greater unity and promote literacy and language retention within the Dene communities.

Four types of standardization were discussed by the Dene Standardization Project. The first, community standardization involved selecting a writing system uniform for all speakers within a community but not reflecting individual differences in pronunciation between speakers in that community. The second, regional standardization involved choosing a writing system uniform for all speakers within a region but not reflecting differences in pronunciation between different communities. The third, territorial standardization meant choosing a system leading to uniform alphabets and writing conventions across all five northern Dene languages. The fourth, pan-Dene standardization involved selecting a system which would lead to uniformity with respect to alphabets and writing practices across all North American Dene languages.

In general, most of the recommendations of the Dene Standardization Project reflect the decision to strive toward community standardization and, where practicable, toward regional standardization of the orthographies for each language group. This decision was based on criteria such as keeping the writing system as phonetic as possible (writing exactly what one hears) and limiting the extent to which already literate speakers would have to revise their writing habits.

The general consensus of the Dene Standardization Project was that in all cases the speech of elders should be chosen as the standard for writing. The motivating factor in this case was that the speech of elders retains greater morphological information than the contracted or shortened

forms which are found in the speech of younger speakers. Another important factor in this decision was the cultural importance of Dene elders. It was further agreed that formal rather than colloquial forms of speech should be chosen as the basis upon which a written standard would be founded.

Why standardize?

There are many benefits which accrue from standardizing the writing systems. First, a standard writing system which is adapted and utilized by native speakers will over time preserve conservative forms of speech, the speech of the elders. Second, if speakers of one language use only one standard writing system it is easier to both teach and learn literacy in the language. Third, if similar materials are no longer duplicated by being printed in several different writing systems for one language, curriculum materials can be published more cost-effectively leading to more materials being printed. Fourth, standardizing the writing systems used by NWT Dene speakers could ideally bring about conformity with the writing systems already in use by other Dene speakers such as the Gwich'in of Alaska and the Chipewyan of Saskatchewan. Uniform standard orthographies will facilitate the production of printed materials in the Dene languages. The availability of a greater quantity and variety of published materials will promote Dene literacy and literature and facilitate the use of Dene languages in both the public and private sectors.

The five Dene languages of the NWT are recognized as official languages under the Official Languages Act (1984, rev. 1986). The Government of the Northwest Territories has committed support to promote, develop, and enhance the indigenous languages of the North. The standardization of the writing systems of the Dene languages will assist in this task since it will unify speakers of each language and reflect the similarities across all languages. It will contribute to the maintenance of cultural distinctiveness and, since literacy promotes personal and social development, will contribute to

the retention of aboriginal culture while enabling the individual to take part in an advanced industrial society.

Recommendations

The Dene Standardization Project spent many hours discussing and documenting a large number of complex problems related to the various writing systems in use. For each language group a set of standard alphabet symbols was defined.

The recommendations dealt with five broad orthographic issues: alternate pronunciations, alphabet symbols, use of symbols, word divisions, and punctuation. Extralinguistic issues such as literacy training, publication of reference materials, second language teaching, linguistic research, place names, and promotion of Dene literature were also the subject of a number of recommendations.

A timeframe for the Dene Standardization Project was approved by the planning committee in 1988. This timeframe involves five phases over a ten year period, retroactive to 1987 when the project was initiated. The first phase, the review of existing orthographies and conventions and recommendations of standards was completed in 1988. The second phase, soliciting feedback and support from northern interest groups has recently been completed. The next phase of the project involves the institution of a permanent committee which will make final decisions regarding the writing systems. It is expected that the permanent committee will have a mandate from the Legislative Assembly to make final decisions on orthographic and language-related matters. Following this phase, the standard writing systems will be introduced to the public, reference and teaching materials will be developed and published, and literacy training will be carried out. The final phase involves a review of the standard orthographies by the standing committees, revision of writing systems, and a continuation of the public awareness and literacy campaigns.

Conclusion

The Dene Standardization Project is a model for other language groups undertaking orthographic standardization. All issues relating to the practical orthographies were discussed at the community level and language specific recommendations were submitted to a committee of native language specialists as an outgrowth of the community meetings. The committee of specialists discussed each recommendation and attempted in all cases to abide by the governing principle of regional standardization where practicable.

The project broadened its scope after the initial recommendations were accepted by all language groups. It became clear that the implementation of the recommendations was critical in order to increase native language literacy and that literacy is part of wider goal of native language and culture retention. The project therefore has determined that a permanent committee which has political power must be set in place to determine the direction of native language research, education, and legislation. The Dene people of the Northwest Territories have through the Dene Standardization Project voiced their desire for self-determination in the field of native language development.